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Soviets propose 50% joint arms cut, kill SDI

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GENEVA, Switzerland — The Soviet Union formally offered the United States a plan for mutual cuts of up to 50 percent in superpower nuclear arsenals at the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) here yesterday in exchange for U.S. abandonment of its "star wars" missile defense program.

But a U.S. official in Washington familiar with details of the Soviet proposal called it disappointing and unfair.

Chief Soviet delegate Viktor P. Karpov called a special plenary session of the 7-

month-old superpower talks yesterday and officially presented Moscow's proposed deal to U.S. negotiators.

This is the first time in the history of U.S.-Soviet relations that Moscow has proposed arms reductions of such magnitude.

The U.S. official in Washington who called the Soviet proposal unfair said it would leave untouched the Soviet force of 308 SS-18 missiles and the Soviet 3-to-1 advantage in warhead throw-weight.

The proposal also would include U.S. medium-range missiles based in Europe in the reduction, but not the 440 Soviet SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe. "The levels on offensive missiles themselves are so unappealing and so unfair as to disappoint everyone that has looked at them," said the official, who spoke on condition he remain unidentified.

The plan is so unbalanced that no argument is expected among various factions in the U.S. government or America's allies, the official said. His comments to The Washington Times last night were the first to describe details of the Soviet proposal first

made last Friday by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze in a White House meeting with President Reagan.

"This is put-up or shut-up time for the Russians," said a U.S. intelligence official in Geneva, who spoke on condition that he remain anonymous.

"[Soviet Communist party leader Mikhail] Gorbachev has been dropping hints everywhere for the past three months about how extraordinary this proposal is. And the media in the West have fallen all over themselves giving the Soviets as much ink as they want.

"First, it was a 30 percent reduction in

strategic missiles. Next, it was 40 percent. Now everyone's talking 50 percent.

"What I want to know is, 50 percent of what?"

Sources close to the talks say it is expected to take Viktor Karpov, the chief Soviet arms negotiator, two days to fully explain Moscow's proposal.

The Kremlin is believed to be proposing that neither power place more than 60 percent of its offensive nuclear arms in any one leg of the strategic triad, which is comprised of land-based intercontinental ballis-

tic missiles, manned bombers carrying cruise missiles as well as bombs, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

In return, Moscow is asking, among other things, that the United States halt research and development into President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, commonly known as "star wars."

Both U.S. and Soviet negotiating teams here have clamped unusual secrecy on the proceedings, as the Russians explain their package of proposals.

Neither Mr. Karpov nor Max Kampleman, the chief U.S. negotiator, have scheduled press conferences or briefings. Spokesmen for both sides refuse to confirm or deny rumors about the precise nature of the Soviet proposals.

According to Reagan administration officials in Geneva, in addition to the other items in the Soviet package, the Kremlin is proposing a ban on new types of strategic weapons systems, and an agreement to deploy no nuclear weapons in areas of the world where they are not now situated.

Observers here say that is an effort by Moscow to prevent the Dutch from installing cruise missiles as part of the NATO alliance's effort to checkmate the Soviet arsenal of mobile, triple-warhead SS-20 missiles targeted on Western Europe.

Virtually all of the Soviet Union's strategic nuclear clout is in the big land-based missiles that fall under command of the strategic rocket forces.

Unlike the United States, which tries to maintain an equilibrium between forces it places in each leg of the strategic triad, the Soviets have few operational submarines capable of launching missiles.

Similarly, while its intercontinental bomber force is ultra-modern and potentially capable of delivering a massive nuclear strike, Soviet generals apparently have little faith in it.

"Almost all Moscow's eggs are in one basket," said the American intelligence official, "and it's going to be very interesting to see the exact figures they are putting on the table today."

Sunday night, Pravda, the newspaper of the Communist Party, published an editorial saying the U.S.S.R. has put forward "tangible political initiatives" at the arms talks here, but so far "nothing has been heard from across the ocean" except a mounting campaign of anti-Soviet propaganda.

On the Moscow television news show "Vremya" ("Time") last night, Boris Kalyagin, who is billed as a "senior commentator," accused officials of the Reagan administration of trying to wreck the arms talks and sabotage the upcoming summit here on Nov. 19-20 between Messrs. Reagan and Gorbachev.

There is still time, Mr. Kalyagin said, to make the summit "constructive and useful" if the United States accepts all proposals Mr. Karpov is outlining to American negotiators.

Mr. Gorbachev, who begins a four-day state visit to France tomorrow, his first trip to the West since he assumed power six months ago, may detail Soviet proposals to French President Francois Mitterrand.

If so, say Western observers, the Soviet leader may divulge some, if not all, of the proposals in Paris.

The Soviet arms-reduction ideas are believed to be tailored to the structure of the START talks, which are conducted on three levels: strategic, or long-range, missiles; intermediate, or medium-range, missiles; and space-based defensive weapons.

Staff writer Walter Andrews in Washington contributed to this report.